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Bhutan - China Boundary Dispute: Evaluating the Impact of a New Roadmap

Nihar R Nayak*

Abstract

The article examines the evolving dynamics of Bhutan-China boundary negotiations, culminating in the signing of the Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) in October 2021. This agreement, set against the backdrop of 38 years of unresolved territorial disputes, carries significant geopolitical implications for the region. In the context of Bhutan's counterclaims in Doklam and China's assertions over the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS), the TSR's objectives are critically analyzed—exploring its potential to legitimize Chinese territorial claims, isolate Bhutan's disputes from India, and exert pressure on Bhutan for territorial concessions and diplomatic compromises. Additionally, the article delves into China's strategic efforts to exploit Bhutan's internal divisions post-democratisation, leveraging these fractures to advance its broader regional interests.



Since the 17th century, Bhutan has endeavoured to distance itself from the strategic competition and territorial disputes of major powers. Geopolitical and geo-cultural factors have predominantly shaped this policy. Notably, Bhutan's stance of neutrality during periods of intense conflict, coupled with its assurance to prevent the use of its territory by external forces, has been

carefully observed by its neighbouring countries. Concurrently, Bhutan has maintained economic, cultural, and strategic relations with India, underscored by geographical and political considerations. Although the 1949 Treaty of Peace and Friendship did not explicitly address security cooperation between India and Bhutan, it effectively served as a deterrent against Chinese aggression towards Bhutan.

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The geopolitical landscape of the central Himalayan region has undergone significant shifts due to several key developments: China's consolidation in Tibet, the Sino-Indian War of 1962, its rise as a global power, Bhutan's transition to a constitutional monarchy in 2008, and the extensive infrastructure development in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) under China's Western Development Programme since the 1990s. As tensions between China and India have escalated, China has increasingly pressured its neighbors—particularly Bhutan—to maintain an equitable relationship akin to its engagement with India.

Despite Bhutan's longstanding efforts to remain neutral in Sino-Indian disputes, it has been inevitably drawn into these conflicts. Instances of this include Bhutan's prolonged boundary disputes with China, the Chinese incursion into Doklam, and Beijing's recent territorial claims over Bhutan's eastern sector. Consequently, Bhutan's traditional approach—maintaining distance from neighboring tensions while fostering deeper economic cooperation with India—has become increasingly ineffective.

Given the likelihood of future Sino-Indian conflicts and the need to safeguard its territorial integrity

against further Chinese claims, Bhutan may seek a new diplomatic agreement as a means to address its unresolved boundary disputes with China.

Historically, the interests of smaller states have received limited attention within the framework of global governance, which has largely been shaped by major powers. Since the establishment of the United Nations, there have been few substantive changes in safeguarding the rights of smaller states. In fact, their interests were arguably better protected during the Cold War than in today's multipolar world order.

In this evolving global landscape, economic issues and non-traditional security concerns have taken precedence over conventional security matters, leading to greater interdependence among major powers. As a result, defending the interests of smaller states poses a considerable risk for any country or coalition, as doing so could jeopardize market access and diplomatic relations with dominant global actors.

Consequently, in an era marked by geopolitical uncertainty, smaller states may increasingly turn to diplomatic strategies or compromise formulas to navigate disputes with major powers—favoring negotiation over direct military or legal confrontations, which remain largely dictated by larger nations.

In this context, the research paper will explore the following issues:

- Why did Bhutan and China find it necessary to establish the Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) despite having already conducted 24 rounds of boundary negotiations under the 1988 Joint Communiqué?
- What negotiation strategies have China and Bhutan employed in their boundary discussions thus far?
- Is it possible for China and Bhutan to resolve their border disputes independently of India?

Bhutan and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) on 14 October 2021, marking a significant milestone in their 40-year boundary negotiations. While India merely “noted” the development, Chinese media framed it as a major diplomatic victory—despite China lacking a formal mission in Thimphu. *Global Times* (GT), a Communist Party of China (CPC) mouthpiece, highlighted India’s concerns over China’s territorial claims in Bhutan’s western and eastern sectors, both bordering India. The report declared, “The move was hailed by Chinese experts as a historical milestone that broke the current deadlock caused by India and laid the foundations for the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Bhutan.”¹

The signing of the MoU came amid heightened tensions between Bhutan and China, following Beijing’s fresh claims in June 2020 over Doklam and the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) in Bhutan’s eastern region—distinct from disputes along the northern border. China asserted its claim at the 58th Global Environment Facility (GEF) Council meeting, opposing funding for a project in SWS, labeling it a “disputed” territory. However, it has yet to provide cartographic evidence to support this claim.

This controversy surfaced as both nations were seeking a date for the 10th expert group meeting and the 25th boundary negotiations in 2020. The expert group convened from April 6-9, 2021, and the 25th boundary talks took place in Beijing on October 25, 2023. During this meeting, both sides signed the *Cooperation Agreement on the Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) for delimiting and demarcating the China-Bhutan boundary*. Established during the 13th Expert Groups Meeting in August 2023, the JTT was tasked with facilitating the implementation of the Three-Step Roadmap MoU.

Following the SWS claim, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) of Bhutan issued a demarche to the Chinese embassy in New Delhi,

asserting, “Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary is an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan.”² China’s claim was surprising for Bhutan, as the country has long been in dispute with China over its western and north-central sectors, but the eastern sector had not previously been part of boundary talks, and China had not claimed rights over the SWS earlier. China responded to Bhutan’s demarche by reiterating that “the boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited. There have been conflicts over the eastern, central, and western sectors for a long time.”³ In addition to Bhutanese resistance to Chinese incursions into its territory, Indian media reports referenced satellite images that depicted the construction of Chinese villages within Bhutanese territory.⁴

Despite ongoing disputes, official press releases from both countries have omitted references to the specific occasion when the MoU on the Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) was signed, even though the 25th round of boundary talks was originally scheduled for 2021. Previous negotiations had been postponed due to Chinese incursions into Bhutan’s Doklam region in 2017, followed by further delays citing COVID-19 restrictions.

According to the MoFA press release, the TSR agreement was

finalized during the Kunming meeting and developed in line with the 1988 Guiding Principles.⁵ However, uncertainty remains over whether China’s newly disputed claim over Bhutan’s eastern boundary is now incorporated into the TSR. If Bhutan has conceded, it would officially recognize the Sakteng region as part of its boundary dispute with China.

Historically, Bhutan has exhibited limited resistance to Chinese territorial claims concerning its border areas and has typically been receptive to discussions about these disputes, with the exception of a few official statements. In that case, considering the uncertainty surrounding the Sakteng situation, it is evident that the TRS, formed following China’s claims over the Sakteng region in Bhutan, will address this issue within its framework.

Contrasting Perspectives to the Conflict

The Bhutan-China boundary negotiations have persisted for over 40 years without resolution, largely due to differing perspectives on the conflict. China’s claims stem from historical and cultural ties between Tibetan monasteries and Bhutan since the 17th century, while Bhutan views the dispute through a geopolitical lens—emphasizing

territorial integrity, security, and sovereignty, shaped by past invasions and the 1949 Peace and Friendship Treaty with India, which countered Chinese claims in the Himalayas.

Lacking substantial historical evidence, China has gradually occupied Bhutanese territories by exploiting un-demarcated boundaries and leveraging geopolitical concerns to pressure Bhutan into direct diplomatic engagement—challenging India's treaty with Bhutan. At the same time, boundary negotiations have provided China with a diplomatic channel to engage Bhutan despite its limited physical presence there.

History of Boundary Negotiations

Chinese claims over Bhutanese territory are based on the Qing dynasty's influence in Tibet during the 18th century. However, these claims lack supporting evidence. Available historical evidence indicates that by the time the Qing dynasty extended its influence over Tibet, Bhutan had already been established as a distinct political entity under the Shabdrung institution led by Ngawang Namgyal in the first quarter of the 17th century. Historical references suggest that the emergence of the new Drukpa Lama-led institution in Bhutan was unacceptable to Tibet's

dominant Gelugpa sect, resulting in frequent conflicts between Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhist sects.⁶

Long before the Qing dynasty's contact with Lhasa, Bhutanese and Tibetan Buddhists engaged in battles over intra-sect rivalries. Tibetan migrants fleeing infighting in Tibet during the 10th century settled in Bhutan but were later regarded as refugees by Tibet. Leo Rose notes, "There are no known cases in Bhutanese history in which Tibetan migrant communities in Bhutan recognised and accepted political obligations and allegiance to Tibetan civil rulers. Tibetan migration to Bhutan thus did not constitute colonization similar to, for instance, British migration to North America and Australia."⁷

From Bhutan's perspective, monastery exchanges were purely religious, not indicative of subordination to Tibet. Nirupama Rao, citing Rumbold, states, "The Tibetans had never accepted 'suzerainty' (or 'sovereignty') of China over Tibet as the 1914 Simla [present Shimla] Conference between British India, China and Tibet had never been accepted by China and because of this, subsequently, the Tibetans 'never accepted suzerainty.'"⁸ The most definitive evidence of Tibet's limited influence in Bhutan was that no Tibetan monastic institutions were ever permitted within Bhutan.⁹

The territory controlled by migrant Tibetan sects in the southern Himalayas—later known as Bhutan—had no direct geographical or cultural contact with mainland China before Beijing's claim over Tibet. Its ties were solely religious and cultural with Tibet. As a result, China's claims over Bhutan could not be established while Tibet remained beyond its absolute control.¹⁰

The Eden Memorandum notes that following the Chinese Revolution of 1911—when Chinese forces withdrew—Tibet functioned as a de facto autonomous entity.¹¹ Russian sources further corroborate China's absence in Tibet during this period. Quoting a Soviet account, former Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale highlights that,

“Within a month of Mao's proclamation establishing the People's Republic of China... Premier Zhou Enlai had informed [Soviet officials] about Chinese plans to attack Tibet immediately after the liberation of Sichuan and Xinjiang... Chinese were not physically present inside Tibet, which had, for all practical purposes, been autonomous since the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911. The Chinese liaison mission was also expelled by the Tibetans in July 1949.”¹²

China's plans to invade Tibet post-revolution indicate it lacked

administrative control over the region, as no state re-occupies territory already under its governance. Thus, historical evidence suggests that China's claims over Bhutan may be misleading.

China's historical claims over Bhutan remain contested, particularly given Bhutan's defeat in the Anglo-Bhutan War (1774) and subsequent treaties—the Sinchula Treaty (1865) and Punakha Treaty (1910) with British India.¹³ Notably, Bhutan did not seek Tibetan support in these conflicts, nor did China officially oppose the treaties. In the post-British era, Bhutan signed the Peace and Friendship Treaty with India in 1949 and was admitted to the United Nations as a sovereign nation on 21 September 1971. As a permanent UN member, China could have challenged Bhutan's sovereignty but did not.

A Bhutanese scholar notes that Chinese claims trace back to historian Tieh-tsung, who recorded a vague suzerainty asserted by Tibetan rulers before the Chinese emperor in 1731. Mao Tsetung later likened five Himalayan states, including Bhutan, to “five fingers” of Tibet in 1930. Following the India-Bhutan Treaty in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) released new maps, claiming extensive Bhutanese territory and occupying

around 300 square miles in northern and northeastern Bhutan. In 1959, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) seized eight Bhutanese enclaves in western Tibet, while Premier Chou En-Lai pushed for direct bilateral border talks with Bhutan. This forced Bhutan to close its northern border, withdraw its representatives from Lhasa, and recall officers from western Tibet in 1960.¹⁴

Despite lacking evidence for its claims, China has continued using strong-arm tactics to encroach on Bhutanese territory, as seen in other disputes. Given its aggressive continental policy,¹⁵ Bhutan likely opted for negotiations with China, aligning with its foreign policy of avoiding conflict with immediate neighbours.

Bhutan-China boundary negotiations began in 1984, with 24 rounds held until 2016. The 10th expert group meeting took place in Kunming in April 2021, conducted under the 1988 Joint Communiqué on Guiding Principles and the 1998 Agreement on Peace, Tranquility, and Status Quo in the Bhutan-China border areas.

Talks remained unproductive due to four key reasons:

1. Beijing pressured Bhutan to swap illegally occupied land in the central-northern sector for disputed western territory, strategically vital to India.

2. China sought Bhutan's approval to open a mission in Thimphu in exchange for accepting boundary positions in the western and eastern sectors—both proposals were unacceptable to Bhutan.

3. Despite the 1998 agreement, China continued setting up ethnic settlements and cultural centers within disputed territories.

4. China expected Bhutan to exclude India from resolving territorial disagreements in tri-junction areas.

China's Approach to Border Disputes

China employs a multifaceted approach to territorial disputes, adapting its strategy based on geographic location, strategic interests, regime security concerns, and the nature of neighboring states.¹⁶ A strong correlation exists between regime instability in a neighbouring country and the resolution of border issues with China. To date, Beijing has settled disputes with 12 of its 14 neighbors, typically adjusting its stance based on the strategic value of contested territories. As noted, "Most of China's disputes are located on its long land border adjacent to frontier regions where the authority of the regime has been weak."¹⁷

However, China's tactics remain fluid. While it has displayed flexibility with smaller neighbors,

Bhutan remains an exception. Vijay Gokhale describes China's territorial strategy as exerting pressure through multiple claims, leveraging disputes to achieve broader objectives, and resuming negotiations when advantageous—using its strength to “extract maximum concessions without conceding their core position.”¹⁸ An example of this approach was China's use of Sikkim to pressure India into acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, even publishing maps depicting Sikkim as part of China.¹⁹

China's approach to Bhutan has combined soft power and pressure tactics. Initially, it framed its territorial claims within broader border issues with India, given Bhutan's proximity and strong bilateral ties. Beijing perceives Bhutan's decisions as being closely linked to India.²⁰

China typically resolves territorial disputes when a neighboring country is governed by an authoritarian regime or a strong leader. After failing to leverage Bhutan's monarchy, its strategy shifted following Bhutan's transition to multiparty democracy in 2008 and rising India-China tensions post-Doklam. Beijing now appears to exploit divisions within Bhutanese society over foreign policy and economic issues.

Bhutan's evolving foreign policy is evident in the differing approaches

of its three democratically elected governments since 2008. In 2019, the opposition party, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) supported the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) government's push to expand foreign diplomatic ties, accusing the People's Democratic Party (PDP) government of previously stalling diplomatic outreach.²¹

Pressure Tactics

Bhutan's foreign policy has been shaped by its geography, territorial size, population, sovereignty concerns, economic limitations, and Buddhist heritage since the 17th century. Until 1959, Bhutan followed a Policy of Limited Engagement (PLE) to avoid antagonizing China and entanglement in the India-China rivalry.

China perceives Bhutan's PLE as a deliberate attempt to distance itself, despite Bhutan's deep ties with India. Lacking direct diplomatic relations with Bhutan, China sees this as a challenge to its security, prestige, and influence. Consequently, Beijing has employed pressure tactics—including territorial disputes—to assert its presence. A Bhutanese scholar notes, “Ultimately Bhutan and China need to resolve their boundary disputes or such false claims will come up as a pressure tactic.”²²

Three key points emerge:

1. China has consistently laid claim to Bhutanese territory along the northern and western borders, pushing for boundary negotiations since 1984.²³

2. During these talks, China has proposed swapping larger Bhutanese territories in the northern sector for smaller disputed western territories—closer to India's Siliguri Corridor, the narrow passage connecting mainland India to the northeast near the India-China border.

3. By pressuring Bhutan into territorial exchanges, China aims to reshape strategic alignments in the region.

Bhutan has handled border issues with China discreetly, avoiding public discussions despite escalating incursions since 2004. Apart from Chinese road construction in Doklam, Bhutan has largely refrained from acknowledging territorial encroachments. Foreign Policy cites a Bhutanese government source reporting "at least 38 incursions by Chinese soldiers across Bhutan's western borders and seven formal protests by Thimphu to Beijing" between 2006 and 2009.²⁴ Notably, border disputes with China receive little coverage in Bhutanese media and are primarily reported in Indian or Western outlets.

Bhutan remains part of China's Himalayan occupation policy, as Mao

Zedong famously likened Tibet to the palm and the five Himalayan kingdoms to its fingers—a statement China has yet to officially renounce. Despite China's persistent pressure tactics to assert influence in the Eastern Himalayan region, Bhutan's response has remained pragmatic, shaped by geostrategic realities and structural asymmetries in its relations with both India and China.

Bhutanese Approach

As a small, landlocked nation with historical ties to Tibet and concerns over Chinese aggression in the Himalayas since 1950, Bhutan has taken a cautious, calculated, and consultative approach to its border disputes with China. Guided by its undeclared foreign policy of "silence and cautious interaction", Bhutan has sought to safeguard its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and unique Drukpa culture.²⁵ Leo Rose describes Bhutan's stance as "isolationist".²⁶

Bhutan remains mindful of India's sensitivities when expanding its diplomatic ties, aiming to avoid offence. Seeking a peaceful resolution, Bhutan entered boundary negotiations with China in the mid-1980s to prevent further territorial loss. However, it also had to carefully balance India's strategic concerns in the western sector with China's pressure for a land swap granting access to larger territories in the Doklam tri-junction— an

arrangement Bhutan could not accept without consulting India.

Certainly! Here's a more concise version with improved fluency and impact while retaining key details, quotations, and citation numbers:

Bhutan and China approached border negotiations differently—Bhutan sought a swift, sector-by-sector resolution, while China prolonged talks to pressure Bhutan into accepting a “package deal.” This deal included (i) major land swaps between the western and northern sectors, (ii) easing land swap conditions if Bhutan allowed a Chinese mission in Thimphu, (iii) opening Bhutan's market to Chinese investment, and (iv) restricting India's access to the strategically significant Tawang region via Sakteng sanctuary. In 2013, China added another proposal—pressuring Bhutan to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it remains the only South Asian country besides India to reject the programme.

The 2017 Doklam incident left a lasting psychological impact on Bhutan, heightening fears of Chinese aggression and stalling the 25th round of border dialogue. Subsequent delays due to Bhutan's 2018 parliamentary elections and the COVID-19 pandemic prevented talks from resuming. Amid Bhutan's firm stance against China's Doklam claims, Beijing declared Sakteng

Wildlife Sanctuary a disputed area. In response to Indian media coverage, China warned “a third Party”—implicitly India—not to “point fingers” in what it considered a bilateral issue between Beijing and Thimphu.²⁷

In response to the 2017 Doklam standoff, China's growing global stature, and new territorial claims, Bhutan sought to resolve boundary conflicts swiftly—potentially at the cost of some land—to avoid escalating India-China tensions. Given India's stake in the dispute, Bhutan consulted New Delhi on its evolving border strategy with China.

Doklam was a turning point for Bhutan, reshaping its approach to security. Instead of relying solely on India, Bhutan aimed to distance itself from Sino-Indian rivalries, pursue a dispute-free border with China, and reinforce its foreign policy independence.

Frustrated by slow negotiations and India's perceived role in the delays, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began constructing a motorable road from Dokala towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri on 16 June 2017—violating the 1988 and 1998 agreements between Bhutan and China. In a press release on 29 June 2017, Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally objected, stating, “the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct

violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our [China and Bhutan] two countries.”²⁸

Despite Bhutan’s claim on Doklam, China unilaterally reclaimed the same areas. On 7 August 2017, during an interaction with an Indian media delegation, Deputy Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Chinese Government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Wenli, claimed that Thimphu had conveyed to Beijing through diplomatic channels that the place [Doklam] where the trespassing happened is not Bhutanese territory. Wenli also told the delegation that “Bhutanese find it very strange that the Indian border troops are on Chinese soil.”²⁹

Bhutan firmly rejected China’s claim on Doklam. In November 2016, during the 18th session of the National Council, then Foreign Minister Damcho Dorjee affirmed that Doklam was among Bhutan’s disputed territories with China, responding to a query from Tshering Dorjee, a National Council member from Haa district. Earlier, Bhutan’s executive and legislative bodies had unequivocally dismissed Beijing’s claims on multiple occasions.³⁰

India’s Dilemma

India’s approach to the Bhutan-China boundary negotiations combines concern, caution, and

consultation. Two of the three disputed sectors are strategically vital to India, prompting officials to voice alarm over China’s unilateral actions in Doklam. Then Eastern Commander of the Indian Army Lt. Gen. Manoj Pande warned, “China is building an alternative axis in the Chumbi valley, which is close to the Siliguri corridor. They are increasing their depth by building roads through Bhutanese territory.”³¹

India’s concerns stem from past border conflicts with China and Beijing’s territorial nationalism, which employs an incremental and tactical approach to pressing claims. India believes that any Bhutan-China settlement that disregards its sensitivities will have significant strategic consequences, particularly given its own unresolved boundary disputes with China. India is especially wary of the settlement line between Bhutan and China, as Beijing has rejected the 1914 Shimla Conference outcomes and the MacMahon Line.

China has consistently pressured Bhutan to exchange land in the western and eastern sectors for northern territory, a move that would strengthen the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the Siliguri and Tawang regions of India. Given Bhutan’s vulnerability, India urges caution, expecting Bhutan to keep it informed before finalising any border agreements with China.

This Indian stance has two diplomatic implications. First, since Bhutan has yet to accept any Chinese proposals, Beijing perceives India as obstructing progress. Some Bhutanese officials privately shared with their Chinese counterparts that “they are stuck due to pressure from India”,³² though they also acknowledged the need to settle disputes to avoid Chinese harassment.

Second, Bhutanese perceptions of India’s approach have permeated grassroots levels, particularly after the introduction of multiparty democracy. Business leaders, students, and political factions like the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) increasingly advocate direct diplomatic ties with China and swift resolution of boundary disputes. Additionally, public opinion strongly favours diversifying Bhutan’s foreign and economic policies beyond India.³³ India thus faces a strategic dilemma—balancing emerging geopolitical challenges while maintaining its influence in the Himalayan region.

Three-Step Roadmap

According to a MoFA press release, the Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) was discussed during the 10th round of expert group meetings in April 2021 and signed following government approval. The roadmap consists of (i)

agreement on border demarcation during formal talks, (ii) on-site visits by both sides to locations along the demarcated line, and (iii) final boundary demarcation.

An *Economic Times* report cites a reliable source stating,

“The three-step roadmap between Bhutan and China is a bilateral arrangement, and it will not cover tri-junctions. With this deal, Bhutan hopes to expedite negotiations to settle boundary disputes as it feels that delay in settling the dispute is resulting in the loss of its territory every year to China due to PLA’s alleged transgressions.”³⁴

While appearing mutually agreed, the TSR’s timing is significant. It likely stems from a Chinese initiative to legitimise new territorial claims and weaken Bhutan-India ties post-Doklam. Bhutanese experts suggest that China’s claim on Sakteng will introduce new negotiation fronts in upcoming boundary talks.

The Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) emerged following two key developments—Doklam and China’s claim on Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) in the eastern Himalayas. While the SWS dispute is a post-1998 issue and was not part of official boundary talks, Bhutan has consistently rejected China’s unilateral claims on Doklam since 2017. By signing the TSR, China

aimed to negotiate both disputes within the broader context of Himalayan geopolitics.

China's claim on SWS appears more reactionary—primarily targeting India rather than constituting a genuine boundary dispute with Bhutan. The SWS lies approximately 32 kilometres from the Bhutan-China border, south of Tawang, and shares a boundary with Arunachal Pradesh. China's objective is to designate SWS as disputed territory to obstruct India's road project linking Tawang and Guwahati (Assam) via SWS. On 26 December 2019, Tapir Gao, a Lok Sabha member from Arunachal Pradesh, proposed that India and Bhutan discuss a border road for socio-economic activities, pilgrimage, and medical emergencies, explicitly excluding military movement. He argued that such a road would foster cultural exchange between both nations.³⁵

A road through Bhutan's "Yeti Territory", or Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS), could provide India with strategic leverage over China. The proposed route, linking Lumla near Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) with Trashigang (Bhutan), would reduce the Guwahati-Tawang distance by 150 kilometres, cutting travel time from 15 hours to around 9-10 hours. Though conceived long ago, the Border Roads Organisation

(BRO) has already completed the Indian side's stretch.³⁶

China has long obstructed India's strategic border road projects in the Himalayas, adopting similar tactics in 2008 to halt the Kailash Mansarovar route via Kalapani and Lipulekh. Leveraging its influence over CPN-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), Beijing encouraged calls for a trilateral dialogue in Kalapani.

Additionally, the Global Environment Facility (GEF)—a US-based environmental funding body established at the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and supported by over 40 donor nations—approved grants for an erosion prevention project in SWS (2018-2019). Given the strategic sensitivity of the region and GEF's involvement, this may have drawn China's attention and heightened tensions.

The Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) was signed just ten days before China enacted its new land border law, which asserts, "Sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country are sacred and inviolable." The law enables China to safeguard its borders and reclaim territories in neighbouring countries through historical-cultural ties, ethnic presence, civilian mobilisation, or military action.³⁷

On 27 October 2021, India's Ministry of External Affairs voiced

concerns, stating, "India and China have still not resolved the boundary question... China's unilateral decision to bring about legislation which can have an implication on our existing bilateral agreements on border management as well as on the boundary question is of concern to us."³⁸ India worries that the TSR's timing suggests China may treat its territorial claims on Bhutan differently from its disputes with India, potentially sowing discord between New Delhi and Thimphu.

Additionally, Bhutan's then Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) government's foreign policy may have encouraged China to revive negotiations. From Beijing's perspective, "Bhutan's Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, who came to power in 2018, had a different agenda compared to the previous government. Before, Bhutan looked for a closer relationship with India and requested its aid, but Tshering began to focus more on independent development."³⁹

While Bhutan's foreign policy was widely debated during the 2008 and 2013 elections, it was largely absent in 2018. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) manifesto focused on strengthening Bhutan's global engagement through organisations like the EU, SAARC, and BIMSTEC.⁴⁰ The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT)

did not mention foreign policy in their manifestos, though DNT campaigned by branding PDP and DPT as pro-India and pro-China respectively.

Despite criticising PDP's approach, Lotay Tshering's foreign policy since 2018 closely mirrored that of DPT, with minor modifications. Indian media speculated that DNT might adopt a Nepal-like rebalancing policy between India and China, given Tshering's emphasis on resuming border talks with China during his campaign.

During Bhutan's democratic period, calls for direct diplomatic ties with China have intensified. Post-election, Tshering reaffirmed, "Our [DNT] views are very clear on foreign policy... Our King [Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck] will be the guiding force... And on India, we believe that Bhutan-India relationship is non-negotiable."⁴¹ However, in March 2023, he suggested in an interview with *La Libre* that Bhutan could resolve its border issue with China. A month before the 4th National Assembly elections, he told *The Hindu* on 7 October 2023, "Over the last three years, many rounds of talks have taken place, and there has been progress... we [Bhutan-China] are inching towards the completion of the three-step roadmap."⁴²

In 2023, boundary negotiations between Bhutan and China took a significant turn. The DNT government, facing declining popularity due to governance issues, economic crises, and unmet electoral promises from 2018, including resolving border disputes with China, aimed to show progress in negotiations to win over voters. This situation presented an opportunity for China to leverage the DNT government's urgency for visible outcomes in border talks. During the 25th Round of talks in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pressured Bhutan to conclude negotiations swiftly, suggesting that "resolving the border issue and establishing diplomatic relations would benefit Bhutan's long-term interests."⁴³

Bhutan and China's border discussions centre on three critical areas—the northern border, Sakteng Forest, and Doklam. However, China's insistence on exchanging northern territories for exclusive control over Doklam has sparked serious concerns in India. The Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) party's politicisation of the issue, which has disregarded India's sensitivities, alongside sustained Chinese pressure on Bhutan, prompted India to convey its concerns directly to the King—Bhutan's ultimate authority on security and foreign policy matters.

Conclusion

China has pursued an integrated approach to boundary negotiations with Bhutan and India in the Himalayas, factoring in deepening India-Bhutan cooperation on security and development. Beijing views India's influence as a key factor in Bhutan's firm negotiating stance on issues like territorial swaps and a Chinese mission in Thimphu. The Three-Step Roadmap (TSR) may serve to address Bhutan separately while managing border disputes with India under China's new boundary law.

Given Bhutan's strategic location, small size, and relatively weak state apparatus, any Chinese policy aimed at isolating India in border negotiations—particularly outside the central-northern sector—would have profound security and political consequences. India prioritises safeguarding its regional interests by promoting democracy, maintaining cultural ties, enhancing security cooperation, and advancing economic development, all of which reinforce its strategic foothold in the Himalayas.

China's narrative on boundary disputes with Bhutan has shifted from historical claims to strategic manoeuvres as India emerges as a global and regional competitor. Beijing appears to be applying

pressure tactics to secure its position in the Eastern Himalayas, while continuing to justify its claims through historical and cultural arguments. However, any settlement based purely on these grounds could threaten Bhutan's territorial integrity, security, and sovereignty. As a small nation that has ceded land to historical Tibetan rulers and British India, Bhutan faces formidable challenges in navigating competing geopolitical pressures. ■

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